

BECOMING DAD

A TRUE STORY OF ONE MAN'S
TRANSFORMATION FROM CLUELESS
HUSBAND TO INVOLVED AND
NURTURING FATHER



Free Pregnancy Section



KELLY CRULL

BECOMING DAD

*A True Story of One Man's Transformation
from Clueless Husband to Involved and
Nurturing Father*

KELLY CRULL



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Cover design by Gloria Byler
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I casually mentioned to my wife that I had decided to dedicate this book to our daughter, she said, “So I get nothing?”

So, first of all, I would like to thank my wife, April, for her companionship. I lost track of how many times she rearranged her schedule so I could write while she watched the kids. She listened to me talk about writing and publishing on countless date nights. She read drafts and made edits on her days off. And, she still thought this book was worth writing.

Thanks to Kim Boer, Marlies De Jeu, Bridget De Yager, Katrina Geertsma, Lindsay Hilkert, Julie Lemley, Kim Ray, and Gwyneth Box for their edits.

Thanks to my friends at the Madrid Writers Critique Group, especially Sue Burke, Sean McLachlan and Lance Tookes.

Thanks to family and friends for providing me with healthy examples of family, in particular my parents, Steve and Pat, who always made time for me, my sister Monica and her husband Jeff who let me live with them during the pregnancy and birth of my niece Josie, Byron and Lisa Borden for their wisdom, and Dan and Diane Ridderhoff for letting me live with them one summer in high school. I had honestly never considered the possibility of a stay-at-home dad until I met Dan.

Thanks to my mother-in-law, Rachel, my sister-in-law, Heidi, Laurie Schmitt, the Cadys, Bowles, and Repettos, Kelly Jennemann, Shani Kilasi, Amy Swacina, our midwife Carmen, Damián and Encarna, Jitu Dongardive, and Adriana Cardona, who shaped this story. Thanks to God for the gift of new life and trusting me to care for a few of his little ones.

PART I

Pregnancy

5 WEEKS

Pregnancy Test

“Do you want me to run down to the pharmacy and get another one?” I asked.

April shrugged. She sat down on the edge of the tub and looked out the window for a while, then buried her face in her hands and wept, her shoulders shaking.

I didn’t know for sure if we were pregnant. Could we trust this piece of plastic? It was disposable, but I was supposed to believe the results were permanent, irreversible, eternal?

Still, that punch-in-the-gut feeling was no doubt, but certainty. April was crying at the edge of the tub because pregnancy was no longer a concept, but a reality.

Five weeks earlier we had visited some friends with a house on the beach. Their two-month-old Tiffany was dangerously cute. She was a fat little cherub without wings. For the first time having a baby didn’t sound like the worst idea, and so, we simply decided to stop not getting pregnant. After all, everyone said getting pregnant could take years. We agreed that we wanted a baby, but we were far from imagining a child in our future.

We had been married for six years, and all that time people had been asking us when we would start a family. I began to believe we were late. Until today, that is, when we took the pregnancy test and all of a sudden we had no choice but to look at the world from a new point of view. I felt young again, but not in a good way. I was horrified at what we had done. I felt guilt and shame and irresponsibility like I was a teenage boy who had knocked up his girlfriend. My stomach swarmed like a beehive. “What are we going to do with a baby?” I thought.

We were not ready for a baby. We had recently moved to Castellón, a small village in Spain where we had no friends, which was no surprise since we were still relying mostly on our high

school Spanish. April was in the middle of a Master's degree in Peace and Development Studies, and I was not making enough money working from home as a web designer to pay our bills.

Maybe I had deliberately avoided preparing myself mentally for having a baby. I knew I would only be able to handle this pregnancy one step at a time. At first I was ready to try to get pregnant, and that was enough. Now that we were pregnant, I needed time to let go of the life I had, everything that was familiar and basic to me, for something unpredictable and even unnecessary. Most likely April and I wouldn't go to Spanish class together or go to the movies together or even get groceries together. We would travel less, go out with friends less, and have sex less. The list streamed through my brain like headlines at the bottom of a television screen. I suppose there was never a good time to have a baby because it would always mean trading in the life I already had for one I didn't know anything about.

I would no longer be the same person, April would no longer be the same person, and now we had everything to learn about the newest addition to our family.

8 WEEKS, 1 DAY

Doctor's Visit

“Wait. Is this where we're going?” I asked. I came to a complete stop on the sidewalk.

“Right here,” April said. “Come on, we're late.”

I didn't move.

“You didn't say we were going to the gynecologist,” I said and nodded at the sign over the front door.

April sighed and put her hands on her hips. “Where else do you think a woman goes for a pregnancy checkup?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and walked into

the clinic. I frowned, shook my head, and reluctantly followed her inside as if I had just been asked to follow her into the women's bathroom.

April signed in, and the nurse pointed the way to the waiting room where a small crowd of women glanced at us from behind their women's magazines. My worst fear had been confirmed: I was the only man in this clinic. We took the last two seats in the room, and I felt like I was having one of those dreams where I was in a public place like the grocery store and happened to catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror only to realize I was naked. Frankly, I would not have felt less awkward sitting in that waiting room completely naked. Not that the women would have noticed. They were absorbed in their magazines.

The tingling in my fingers, my heart pulsing in my chest like an electric fence, feeling warm all over, shortness of breath, I recognized the symptoms. I was embarrassed. The feeling reminded me of being sent to the store to buy tampons for my wife or being convinced to wait in the women's lingerie section by myself while April tried on a sweater. I wasn't worried that someone we knew might see us and know our secret. After all, we only knew a handful of students at the university. I felt embarrassed because everyone in the waiting room knew the only reason a guy goes to the gynecologist is because there's a good chance the girl sitting next to him is pregnant.

I was making my debut as an expectant father, and now that I was here, I knew I wasn't ready to have an audience. I hadn't dared to think of myself as a father yet. In fact, if I had applied for the job—if that's how becoming a dad worked—I would not have been called in for an interview. I was young and unqualified with little to no experience. My own mother had told me I was "not particularly good with kids," as if it was common knowledge. I wanted to be a dad, but I wasn't one yet.

Meanwhile, April eyed the magazines on the coffee table until she found one she liked. She picked it up, opened it, and began to read.

8 WEEKS, 1 DAY

Ultrasound

A few minutes later April was reclined on a hospital bed, and I was sitting in a chair next to her holding her hand. Both of us were watching over our doctor's shoulder as she clicked around the screen, took measurements of our little tadpole and dictated them to her assistant.

I was surprised. Not to see the baby, and not that the baby looked like a tadpole, but because I felt like something was missing.

Although I didn't think of myself as a father yet, the truth was I wanted to feel like one. That's why I was here. For a moment, it made more sense to imagine us in Bern, Switzerland where April was reclined on a sofa covered with elaborate tapestries and lots of pillows, I was sitting in a chair next to her holding her hand, and Hermann Rorschach, the great Swiss psychiatrist, was at his desk. He reached over and handed me one of his famous flash cards.

"What do you see on the card?" he asked. "How does the card make you feel?"

I stared blankly at the card.

"I see a tadpole," I said. "I don't *feel* anything."

I was looking for more than a tadpole on a flash card. I was waiting for something to kick in. I didn't know exactly what, but something very instinctive and paternal that would set into motion my great metamorphosis into the dad I would become. I expected to be changed by seeing this little person. I was counting on it, but nothing happened. I felt the same, like I was

watching a meteorologist explain weather patterns on Doppler radar.

“This isn’t working,” I said. I looked at the card again and shook my head.

Rorschach leaned back in his chair for a moment, stroked his mustache, and then he looked me in the eyes.

“Most of the time we don’t choose the important moments in our lives,” he said. “The important moments choose us.” He paused. “What matters is that we embrace these moments when they come along.”

Rorschach was right. I didn’t feel like a dad, but that didn’t matter. I couldn’t wait around for instinct to kick in. I wasn’t the pregnant one after all. Unlike April whose hormones were literally transforming her into a fully-functional baby-care facility complete with heated Jacuzzi and all-you-can-eat buffet, becoming a dad was a choice—less instinct, like grabbing a snack when I felt hungry, and more choice, like making myself get out of bed in the morning to go for a run.

I didn’t feel different. I didn’t look different. But I was choosing to be a dad.

9 WEEKS

Sailing

Calling family and friends to tell them we’re pregnant has begun to feel like telemarketing. I spend weekends on the phone with a list of people to call and a script of what to say when they pick up. Maybe I should end the conversation by asking them if they would like to consolidate their student loans.

Because no one in Castellón knows we’re pregnant yet, I only feel like we’re pregnant when I’m on the telephone, like I’m somebody who dresses up in chain mail on the weekends and goes to medieval festivals.

I'm no good at keeping secrets either. The only way I've managed to keep my mouth shut when I'm not on the phone is to try to forget we're pregnant altogether, which seems counter productive since in reality I need all the help I can get to believe we are actually pregnant.

So, April and I agreed to tell one person in Castellón. We chose Laurie, even though she is not family, and we have only known her for five months. Laurie is a mother, and if anyone would know how to make the pregnancy seem real, she would. Plus, she lives around the corner and sees April every day at class. No doubt she would remind us we were pregnant.

We met at a hot dot stand, and I don't think Laurie noticed we weren't eating our hot dogs. We were concentrated on watching her squeeze mustard on her hot dog when April broke the silence.

"We have something to tell you."

Laurie looked at both of us, then set down the mustard.

"We're pregnant," April said.

Laurie's face twisted into a pained expression, as if these very words had welled up inside of her a storm of emotions so unexpected and so fierce she could not brace herself in time.

We sat with our hot dogs and watched her giggle while she wiped tears from her eyes.

Watching a friend cry is not easy. I wanted to say something, but I didn't because I didn't know why she was crying. I knew she was crying because we were pregnant, but she also seemed to be crying as a mother, as someone who knew more than we did. She cried like someone watching the opera, or like someone reminded of a story that needed to be told.

I felt the winds begin to blow. Our sails bellied, and we were finally moving, gliding across the water, as if Laurie's tears had somehow launched us on our journey. We were no longer harbored in the life we had known up to this point, but sailing into the storm.

We needed Laurie, now more than ever. Not to remind us that this was real, which seemed obvious now, but to show us the way forward.

9 WEEKS, 3 DAYS

Naps

I unlocked the door with one hand, rolled my bike into the apartment with the other, and after a flutter of helmet, keys, shoes and sweatshirt, found the place completely quiet.

“Hello?”

No answer.

“April?”

Still no answer.

I walked to the office where April’s desk was. No April. I put my head in the kitchen. No April. I checked the den. No April.

I walked back through the apartment to our bedroom and opened the door. The covers lumped together around what I could only guess was a human-sized kidney bean. Without a sound, I sat on the side of the bed and rubbed the covers over April’s back. Slowly she came to life, wriggling a bit, then turning over and pulling the covers down over her chin. She rubbed her eyes.

“What?” she asked. She squinted at me and then at the alarm clock. She pulled the covers back over her head.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“It’s okay if you take naps,” I said. “You’re pregnant.”

She pulled the covers down below her eyes and looked at me suspiciously.

“But I have to write my paper,” she said. I swear she was pouting.

“It’s okay if you take a nap.” I repeated myself, realizing then that these words were becoming a daily mantra.

She took a deep breath, sighed, and stared angrily at the ceiling. I kissed her on the cheek, then leaned across the bed and turned off the alarm clock.

“I’ll check on you later,” I whispered. I left the bedroom and closed the door behind me.

10 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Baby Food

No, I’m not referring to the goo that comes in jars. I’m sure there will be time to experiment with that later. I’m talking about the food my pregnant wife demands for the baby before the baby is even born. What she eats, the baby eats.

April’s requests are a royal decree. “In the name of our baby, The Royal Highness,” April says, “I request Stuffed Eggplant for dinner.”

Who can argue with an embryo?

April even sent me a link this morning to the recipe she had in mind. I thought she was busy studying at the university library, but it turns out she was looking up stuffed eggplant recipes. I had no idea a baby in the womb could have so much control over how we spend our time.

Two hours later, no exaggeration, and I had dinner on the table.

A banquet fit for royalty.

11 WEEKS, 1 DAY

Pesto

A plate of warm pasta. The elegance of extra-virgin olive oil. The vitality of basil. The adventure of garlic. The nuance of pine nuts. And oh, bittersweet Parmesan sprinkled on top.

This is pesto.

Who says women are the only ones who have pregnancy cravings? I am living proof that men do too.

It's not difficult to find out what men crave when their wives are pregnant. They crave every food their wives stopped eating when they got pregnant.

I saw April get sick. I heard how she bad-mouthed her favorite foods. There's no way I'm going to eat those foods in front of her. Still, secretly, I crave them.

Tonight April's out. She won't be back for dinner. As I write these final words, the pasta is boiling on the stove, an open bottle of wine is sitting on the table, and that one special jar of my favorite pesto sauce is waiting for me at the back of the kitchen cupboard.

13 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Pregnancy Brain

Sunday we had lunch with our landlords, Damián and Encarna. We sat around the table outside next to the pool while Encarna brought out the food from the kitchen. April looked so tired, I thought she might curl up in the shade of one of their lemon trees and go to sleep. April was so worn out, in fact, she couldn't keep her Spanish straight. She was beyond being frustrated. She was too tired to care, so she kept talking anyway, which was like listening to a drunk tell a story.

I wanted to say, "April's okay, really. She's got pregnancy brain. She'll just keep getting slower and more forgetful every day until the baby is born. It's an amazing phenomenon to watch, actually."

But I had better judgment.

This is all part of a longer story about learning languages. April and I have always learned languages together, even in high school. In almost every regard, we speak at the same level.

However, we have our differences. Without a doubt I try harder. I read books in Spanish. I rehearse Spanish conversations while I make dinner. I have a weekly language exchange with a guy named Marcos.

Still, April learns as much as I do. I suppose you could say April pays closer attention to details, but when it comes down to it, I think April just has better hardware than I do.

She's smart.

I remember one day having tea with our host mom in Amsterdam while April and I were studying abroad and learning Dutch. She looked at April and said, "You've learned Dutch very quickly. You must have a knack for languages." I was feeling pretty good about our improvement until I realized she wasn't talking to me. "Kelly, you struggle," she said. Much less inspired by this thought, she moved on to the next topic of conversation.

So, you see, I've been patiently waiting my turn. I realize taking advantage of my pregnant wife is not nice, especially when she feels dumber every day, reading articles like "The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy" or "An Introduction to Development and the Anthropology of Modernity."

Still, seeing pregnancy is a temporary thing, I can't see how it will hurt anyone if I enjoy a brief moment of intellectual superiority.

Seems smart to me, don't you think?

16 WEEKS

Boy or Girl?

"Actually, I can't tell," the doctor said.

She took both her hands and pressed gently on April's firm stomach. The baby on the screen wiggled, even yawned, and settled back into a comfortable position.

The doctor scratched her face and looked at the screen.

The baby was resting comfortably. Wombs are apparently a good place for a nap.

We watched the screen as the ultrasound image outlined the spinal column, in perfect form, ten fingers, ten toes, even the stomach, an empty hole, and the heart, all chambers throbbing.

We could see the baby inside and out.

Still, the doctor shook her head.

“I can’t tell,” she said again, admitting defeat.

Sure enough. We looked at the screen, and there was the baby—legs crossed modestly. There was no way to tell if this little baby was a boy or girl unless he or she decided to change napping positions.

I smiled. Already our baby was making decisions. The baby had decided to cross his or her legs, and there was nothing we could do about it.

“We can wait,” I said. I looked away from the screen towards the doctor. “Maybe the baby’s not ready for us to know.”

18 WEEKS, 1 DAY

Carrefour

I’ll admit it—I freaked out a little on Tuesday night when April and I were tossing around ideas about how we would spend our date night.

We had been busy the last two weeks with April finishing her Masters classes and me meeting a hefty deadline at work. My parents would arrive on Wednesday to stay for three weeks, so Tuesday night was our night, our chance to be together just the two of us.

I suggested we go for dinner at Tasca Dos, a little restaurant with tables that spilled out into the plaza, followed by a chilled-out

night at home—maybe we would watch a movie or an episode of *Lost*.

When it was April's turn, she said she wanted to go shopping at Carrefour, a large French department store. We needed a few things before we went on vacation with my parents to Germany next week, like a new carry-on suitcase and some socks and underwear, and now was really the best time to go since we were booked the rest of the week.

I got grumpy. I told April we were getting old. I reminded her that we were already parents, and there was nothing we could do about that now. Any romance we had once had in our relationship was already being replaced by the practicalities of parenthood. I thought of the baby things cluttering our bedroom.

It's not that I don't want to have a baby. Believe me, when I was at the beach today, and I saw all those little kids splashing around in the water, I wanted one of my own.

But what scares me more than anything else about having a little person in our lives is not having enough time for everyone, including April and me.

Time is the best gift. I love being with April, even if we're just sitting on the couch with our laptops, even if she's writing a paper in the living room and I'm coding a website for a client in the office.

I want to be able to give time to our little one, to April and to myself, but it feels like I'm full already. I'm stuffed with life. I can't eat another bite. I'm obese. I need to go on a time diet.

In the end, I told April I'd be good. We went to Carrefour, and we bought a suitcase and socks and underwear. We made the best of the night, walking hand-in-hand to the store and talking all the way.

I guess that's the lesson learned. Time is time, and you might as well make the best of it—whether you're eating a romantic dinner at Tasca Dos or standing in line at the checkout at Carrefour.

19 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

On Call

For weeks I had been pedaling across town on my bike trying not to consider what an accurate metaphor this bicycle was for my own physical condition. We talked like a master and his aging dog.

“Come on, boy,” I’d say, “you can make it.”

He (the bike) would begin whimpering the moment we left the front door of our apartment building, yelping occasionally as he heaved himself one paw after another over each curb and pothole. Getting to class on time was like dragging him on a leash the entire way.

I must have been inspired by the tales of my friend Andy, the veterinarian, who visited last week because here I was in the kitchen doing a major operation on my bike, which rested upside-down on the floor.

I sloshed water over the frame. I hammered chunks of fossilized dirt from the gears with a screwdriver. I even discovered an abandoned bottle of WD-40 in my toolbox and perfumed the air with the smell of my dad’s workshop as the spray washed away rust and grime. I turned one of the pedals with my hand and the rear wheel began to spin. I turned faster and faster, the sounds from the kinks in the back tire steadying into a rhythm that hummed like a washing machine.

We had a heartbeat—for a few moments, at least—before things turned for the worse. Turning the pedal with one hand, I began clicking through the gears with the other. The bike convulsed as the chain coughed and choked from one gear to the next before howling so loudly I thought we were going into cardiac arrest. I had four more gears to go, and the bike wouldn’t budge. He was flatlining.

I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but I was prepared to

do anything. I would even consult the user's manual. While the bike lay motionless on the floor in the middle of the kitchen, I read through the section on "Adjustment of the Right Shift lever/Rear derailleur" and meticulously followed each step of the procedure.

Nearly an hour and a half had passed on the operating table all leading up to this moment. With only a few turns of the gears I would know whether I had saved a life or lost a faithful companion. What was done was done. I was ready.

I gripped the pedal with my right hand.

"Kelly? Are you in the kitchen?"

April was calling me from the living room, but I felt like she was calling me from another place completely, another story, in fact.

"Yeah," I said, "I'm in the kitchen," my hand still on the pedal.

"Come here a second," she said. "The baby just moved, and I can feel it with my hand."

This was our new game. The baby moves, and I come running. So far, I hadn't made it in time. I wasn't fast enough.

Feeling the baby move was like a fire drill—drop everything and exit the building immediately. I didn't expect that. I guess I didn't think the baby would interrupt what I was doing so much, at least while he or she was corralled in mama's playpen. I thought the baby would fit into the cracks, into my spare time, when I wasn't busy.

Of course I knew our lifestyle would have to change later. I've watched my sister carry her kids at arms' length to the bathroom for a diaper change. I've talked with plenty of parents who think it's the most natural thing in the world to carry on a conversation and holler at your kids at the same time.

Maybe being more flexible was something I needed to learn for now too. If I was going to feel the baby move, I needed

to be on call. I had to be less like a surgeon and more like a paramedic.

I took my hand from the pedal and looked at it. It was gloved with oil. My socks soaked in a puddle of muddy water. Clods of dirt smeared the floor. Tools littered the room. I looked around for something to wipe off my hands.

At least for now, I wasn't going anywhere.

20 WEEKS, 3 DAYS

Ways to Show Affection

I subscribe to *The Sun Magazine*, and recently I read an essay called "Ways to Show Affection." The essay is by a woman named Virginia Eliot who writes about her experience sitting in an abortion clinic contemplating her second abortion. She pulls apart a tangled mess of story and leaves the reader as haunted as she is by her own obsession with being pregnant and the reality of being a mother.

She recounts the experience of being pregnant subjectively and completely—the cocooning of her body, the self-absorption of a new mother, the habit of studying other parents with their children, and the devotion of a mother to her unborn child. She writes:

Pregnancy is a lot like hunger. It sits at the bottom of your stomach and controls your every thought. You try to distract yourself from it, but nothing works for long. Children on the street look like fresh-baked bread; babies in their mother's arms, the sweetest pastries. You stop and stare, and the back of your throat gets hot with desire. You lie in bed at night and think of suckling infants when you touch yourself.

Virginia's essay caught me on a day when having a baby felt less like the miracle of new life and more like a long to-do list:

- Research baby carriers online.
- Make a list of questions to ask our doctor at next checkup.
- Try to keep upcoming baby shower a secret from April. Sssshhh!
- Sign up for childbirth classes.
- Call the midwife who was recommended to us.
- Take a tour of the hospital.
- Call dentist to make an appointment for April. (Pregnancy is hard on teeth.)
- Make a list of baby names I like.

I asked April for suggestions to put on this list, and as I'm writing these words, she's still listing off things we need to do. In other words, the list goes on.

In the same way that hospitals can sometimes seem over-medicalized for an event that continues to happen naturally in many parts of the world—my friend Jitu from India tells me that in some parts of his country women deliver their own babies while they're at work in the fields—I don't like the thought that we may be burying ourselves in too many logistical details to see the miracle happening right here in our own home.

I don't want to take for granted the safe, healthy baby we have growing in April's belly.

Yesterday helped me remember why I want to be a dad. Our friends Troy and Heather are visiting from Madrid, and I got to make a sand castle with their son Nic who is six. I realize April and I aren't going to have a six-year old around for a while, but I enjoyed playing in the sand. Nic and I scooped out a moat around the castle, filled the moat with sea water from a plastic

pale, and watched the water seep into the sand. Afterwards, I helped Nic pile sand over his dad until all we could see of him was his sunburned face.

Come to think of it, I can't wait to be a dad.

P.S. Virginia, thanks for your essay. I hope someday you'll find yourself looking into the eyes of your own child.

20 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Spoiler

“**S**he looks healthy,” the doctor said while she drew circles on the frozen ultrasound image with a trackball and typed things into the computer.

April and I looked at each other.

“Sorry, what did you say?” I asked.

“I said she looks healthy,” the doctor said, looking at us over her shoulder and nodding at the ultrasound.

“The baby’s a girl?” April asked.

The doctor stopped typing and stared at the ultrasound.

“Most definitely.”

She swiveled around in her chair and looked at us.

“I didn’t tell you the sex of the baby at the last appointment?”

We shook our heads. “No, you couldn’t tell because the baby’s legs were crossed,” I said. “I mean *her* legs were crossed,” I added, correcting myself.

The doctor scratched her face and looked at the screen again.

“Well, you have a baby girl,” she said, and shrugged.

22 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Belly

This past weekend we were in Madrid. We got on the metro Friday night, and there was nowhere to sit. The car was

packed. A man sitting in the back corner looked at April, then got up and stood next to the door.

April looked at me and grinned. “He just gave me his seat because I’m pregnant,” she said, gloating. She walked over and sat down.

This is the third incident of its kind. There was the guy in Castellón, the first one, who reverently gave April his seat at mass. Then there was the waiter at the restaurant who offered wine to everyone but April. And now this guy on the metro.

It was official. April was showing.

The funny thing was April and I couldn’t tell. We had no idea. All this time I was hoping April would get really big—simply because I thought it would be cool, which April thought was just plain mean. In the end, I couldn’t even tell the difference because I was with April too often to notice the gradual changes happening to her body.

Over all, though, I am incredibly thankful that becoming a parent is a gradual process. If storks really did drop babies in blankets on our doorsteps, I would need at least nine months to prepare anyway.

When I think of all the things we still have to do in order to have the baby, like the fact that we still haven’t chosen a name, I have to remind myself to take it one day at a time. If I do a little bit today, and a little bit tomorrow, and a little bit the day after that, it all adds up to a lot of little bits.

Maybe I can’t always see the progress we were making, but if the guy on the metro can, I suppose that counts for something.

23 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

Evolution

The phone rang. I reached over April and fumbled for the phone from the nightstand.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Mimi.”

She hesitated. “Are you in bed already?”

I looked at the clock. “Um...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I woke you up. Never mind then.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said, sitting up in bed. “I was...” I spotted my book on the nightstand. “I was just reading in bed and dozed off,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, sounding confused. “Well, in that case, we’re around the corner at the green place getting cocktails. Do you want to come down for a drink?”

I glance at the clock again, then at April sound asleep, her hand resting on her belly.

“I’ll be there in five minutes,” I said.

The second floor of the bar seemed to be reserved for close friends, a living room of sorts, scattered with old furniture, the kind you would find left at the dumpster on a college campus at the end of the semester. The waiter, who appeared to be a drinking buddy when he wasn’t working, sat on the arm of the couch next to me, discussing plans for the weekend and anticipating everyone’s order until he got to me.

I gave up on the drinks menu and ordered a mojito. A familiar drink might help me shake the feeling that my friends had invited me out for a drink because they knew I didn’t get out much now that April was pregnant, and they felt sorry for me.

Once the waiter left, Mimi leaned over and whispered in my ear what everyone else in the room was probably already thinking, “The mojitos aren’t very good here. We get them at this other place. We’ll take you sometime.”

I forced a smile.

The waiter brought my drink. I sat and watched the mint leaves float at the top of the glass. It was turning out to be one of those nights when going out for a cocktail seemed like

brainwashing. Who thought it was a good idea to have a drink in a sweaty bar with worn-out furniture where you couldn't hear what anyone was saying and you would spend upwards of nine euros for a glass of mostly crushed ice and fizzy water?

The coffee table in front of me was littered with empty glasses. My friends lounged on their sofas having conversations—making it work somehow.

The fish out of water feeling was what made me realize at that moment that I had evolved. My friends were right. I was not the person I used to be, even three months before. I had no social life anymore, and regardless of that fact, I still didn't want to be at this bar.

Why do people stop doing things they love so much when they have kids? The answer seemed obvious to me now. They find something they love to do even more. It wasn't so much that I didn't like going out for drinks anymore, but that I would rather be home with April.

I suppose the evolutionary process started with going to bed early with April when she got pregnant. We've always gone to bed together, so I didn't think much about going to bed early. The change in bedtime, however, meant that we had less time together in the evenings, so I made it a priority to be home most nights. While I was home, I discovered that making a baby takes all nine months. It's a hobby in its own right. If I wasn't making dinner for April, or we weren't tackling the next conversation on our pregnancy to-do list, I was sitting next to her on the couch running my fingers through her hair while she cried again for no apparent reason.

I hadn't intended to become someone else. I had simply prioritized.

I left my drink on the arm of the sofa. I paid the waiter and waved to Mimi before bounding down the steps into the street.

I started walking. I knew exactly where I wanted to be.

24 WEEKS, 6 DAYS

Encarna

I can't believe I'm saying this, but every month I look forward to paying our water and electric bills. The reason I don't mind paying the bills is because it gives me an excuse to visit Encarna in her antique shop.

I realized very soon after April got pregnant that Encarna is always on the lookout for more grandchildren. She collects them like she collects antiques. From the time Encarna greets me at the door of her shop to the time I finally find the courage to leave the envelope with her, we only talk about one thing—the baby. I love it.

This last time I went for a visit I scribbled a few baby names on a sticky-note and pasted it on the front of the envelope. April and I wanted to know what a few of our baby names sounded like in Spanish, so I was hoping to run them by Encarna since she doesn't speak English and would pronounce the names in Spanish.

Encarna took one look at the names and said, "I think you should name her Abril, after her mother." Abril is the Spanish version of April. That name was not on the list.

Regardless, Encarna had made up her mind, and she proceeded to walk through her store asking her customers if they didn't think Abril was the most beautiful name for my daughter.

Many of the customers looked confused, so she took the time to explain the whole scenario, who I was, that my wife was pregnant with a little girl, and that she thought our little girl's name should be Abril.

One of the women said, "I like Ana."

Encarna smiled politely and tried again.

"No," Encarna continued, "I said Abril. Don't you think

Abril is the most beautiful name for his daughter?” She wasn’t asking the question as much as telling the woman what she was supposed to say.

“Oh, yes, Abril,” the woman said. “It’s beautiful.”

Encarna was persistent until finally she had filled my sticky-note with a tally of votes for the name Abril, the most beautiful name for our daughter.

Pseudo-Grandma had cast her vote, and she had rallied the townspeople behind her.

25 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Lunch

Most of my friends back home don’t believe me when I tell them little children play in the streets in Spain after midnight. Most nights during the summer I fall asleep with the windows open and the sound of children playing in the square six stories below.

April and I worked in Madrid for three years before moving to Castellón for April’s studies. Many of the international families we knew in Madrid didn’t think twice about sending their kids to bed at eight o’clock, even if their kids sat pouting at the window watching their friends scream bloody murder in the playground below.

Still, sending kids to bed “early” in Spain gets complicated. My friend Jesús says his mom had dinner on the table every night at 10:15. That’s over two hours after my international friends have tucked in their little ones. So, if I choose to put my kids to bed early because I think they need more sleep, I choose to either a) eat with my kids but not at the Spanish meal time, so putting myself further outside of the culture or b) eat my dinner after the kids are in bed, and so sacrifice having dinner together regularly as a family, which is something that’s important to me.

I was telling Laurie my thoughts because Laurie's an incredible listener. Last week at dinner she listened to me talk about coding web pages in PHP for at least half an hour, and the entire time she smiled and asked questions and pretended to be interested.

When I finished explaining that I wanted to find a way to put my kids to bed early but also eat meals with them, Laurie sat quietly, thinking, then asked me, "When you were growing up, did you eat lunch with your parents?"

I thought for a moment. "No," I said, "I was at school."

Laurie pondered my answer.

When Laurie's not solving my problems, she's teaching history in international schools around the world. She's such a good teacher by now that often all she has to do is ask one question, and I've already learned something.

"Actually," I said, "I didn't eat breakfast with my parents either, at least not my dad. He left for work before I was out of bed."

I was in fact answering my own question. Without realizing it, I had stamped "Extra Important" on having the evening meal together as a family because in my family that's what we did. I hadn't considered that we rarely ate breakfast or lunch together.

In Spain, the most important meal of the day is lunch. Often Mom and Dad and the kids have a couple hours off to go home for lunch. Of course times are changing and sometimes kids stay at school while Mom and Dad eat lunch out with their colleagues, but I think many families still have lunch together.

Perhaps having lunch together every day was an idea. April and I could have lunch with our kids and put them to bed on time.

It's funny how sometimes I have these ideas in my head about what's important, and I don't even realize it. I can't think outside of those structures. I've always imagined eating dinner with my kids and having family time in the evening. Family time over lunch didn't cross my mind.

I'm sure life will only get busier with a little girl in our lives. I don't really care what time of day I get to be with her, as long as I get to be with her sometimes.

26 WEEKS, 3 DAYS

Beach Ball

We took the bus to the beach this afternoon. I set the backpack down in the sand, unzipped it, and began emptying the contents out around me—frisbee, sun tan lotion, books, towels.

April sat down on her knees in the sand and dug a small hole. When she finished the hole was about the size of a beach ball.

She carefully unrolled the green beach towel and draped it over the hole. She smoothed out the corners of the towel, then pressed the towel into the hole.

April picked up her book and lay down on the towel, burrowing her belly into the hole in the sand with the dignity and satisfaction of a pregnant woman who had just discovered the perfect way to lie on her belly.

26 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Stretch Marks

“Look right here,” April said, “Do you see anything?” She had her shirt pulled up just over her belly button, so I could see her round pregnant belly, which by the way, is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Right here,” she said, pressing her finger against her skin like she was pointing at Spain on a globe.

“Oh, you mean those stretch marks,” I said.

“Stretch marks?” April asked, both horrified and curious.

“You have two of them right here,” I said, tracing the short blue rivers on her stomach with my finger.

“How long have I had stretch marks?” April asked.

I thought for a second. “I don’t know. Maybe two weeks.”

April’s jaw dropped in complete disbelief. She looked like Munch’s *The Scream*.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” April asked accusingly. She was craning her neck like an ostrich and trying to see around the other side of her belly. It wasn’t working very well.

I smiled. “I guess I thought you knew.”

27 WEEKS

Midwife

I’m not sure where I got my assumptions from, but I thought someone only hired a midwife for one of three reasons:

1. You’ve decided to have the baby at home, in which case a midwife will deliver the baby.
2. You’re wealthy enough that you want to hire an extra person to help coordinate your pregnancy—sort of like hiring a wedding planner.
3. You’re uptight enough that you want to hire an extra person to keep an eye on your doc while you’re in labor to make sure he or she is sticking to your birth plan.

When one of April’s friends at the university mentioned she had had a midwife when she gave birth this past fall, we considered getting one for ourselves.

- Not because we’ve decided to have the baby at home.
- Not because we’re wealthy enough to have a personal pregnancy planner.

- Not because we're worried our doctor is going to mess everything up.
- But because we live outside of our home country.

Between learning medical vocabulary in Spanish to working with an unfamiliar health care system to juggling the advice we get from here and abroad, we thought we could use a baby tutor.

Also, we went to our doctor two weeks ago with a list of questions all written out. Our doctor listened intently as we read through the list, and then told us we should ask our midwife those questions.

"Midwife?" we thought, looking at each other.

We arranged to have lunch with Lledón, the midwife April knew about from her friend at school. As we walked with Lledón to the Chinese restaurant just off the university campus, we asked questions. She was incredibly patient with us the entire way. She didn't even hesitate when we asked her to explain the entire birthing process in Spain in detail.

"Are you asking what happens when you have a baby?" she asked.

April smiled.

"No, I'm asking what happens when you have a baby in Spain?" April replied.

It turns out everyone in Spain has a midwife, whether or not we're rich or paranoid. The midwife and the doctor work together as a team to help us have the baby. The midwife is the one who will teach our childbirth class. She's the one who will help us prepare for having the baby and answer all our questions.

In less than an hour we had been enlightened. I felt so much smarter than I had before. Plus, now I liked the idea of having a midwife—I mean if everyone had one anyway. I liked the fact that she would teach our class, answer our questions, and be with us at the hospital.

For some reason, doctors seem busy. Midwives seem available.

Yesterday Lledón called. She's found one of her midwife friends who works with our insurance company and who actually helped Lledón deliver one of her own babies.

Last week I didn't even know we needed a midwife. This week I'll be very happy to meet her.

28 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

Childbirth Class

Our first childbirth class began with a cheerful hello from our midwife and some encouragement to find a spot on one of the comfy blue mats lying on the floor, take off our shoes, and find a relaxing position.

We began our exercises by scrunching up our toes, relaxing them, scrunching them up again, then rotating our ankles in circles.

The whole experience immediately reminded me of a class I took in college called "Voice and Body Warm-ups." I was the only guy who took the class then, and looking around the room at the four pregnant women on mats, I was the only guy taking this class now.

To put things into perspective, at the end of that college class I was absolutely ecstatic to have achieved my personal goal: I had managed to touch my toes without my legs quivering like a newborn calf. The rest of the class, the girls, however, had long moved on to complex yoga positions with such intimidating names as the Salute to the Sun and the Warrior I pose and others I've thankfully managed to forget.

I think it's safe to say most women are more flexible than men, but even most men are like Gumby compared to me. I bend more like an action figure.

I remember going to the physical trainer with a knot in my hamstring after a high school soccer game. After using all but

the baseball bat sitting in the corner of the room to work out the knot, she shook her head and wiped her forehead. "You're one of the most inflexible people I've ever worked with," she said.

Anyway, despite the fact that the mats and the gym clothes and the mirrors on the walls all reminded me of my Voice and Body Warm-up days, I nonetheless felt optimistic for one very obvious reason: these women had watermelon bellies. I had the upper hand.

We were lying on our backs doing breathing exercises when our midwife asked us to stand up. I watched these round women struggle to their feet with the same compassion as one watches puppies trying to climb stairs.

"Only a few months," I thought, oozing with empathy, "and you'll be back in the shape you were before."

My only hesitation at this point was that I might get bored. Pregnant women have to do easy exercises, and here I was, a healthy, young guy.

That's about the time things began to change, as I remember it.

We were down on all fours, positioned like a cat, breathing deeply and arching our backs, and I noticed something I hadn't expected. Sweat. I was beading up like a newly waxed car.

Given my history, of course I was concerned. "Oh no," I thought, shammying myself off with my shirt, "I'm getting hot. I'm working too hard."

Our midwife told us to relax, close our eyes, and think of a happy place. The pleasant image of April and myself relaxing over a picnic in a shaded forest without distraction, without bugs, without an uncomfortable bum, which is what I usually remember from picnics, was suddenly interrupted with a comic sketch of me as a human boiler, a heat machine with eyes and ears and a mouth like Mr. Potato Head, and about to explode, shaking violently and billowing with steam that filled the small aerobics room.

“Just don’t make me touch my toes,” I thought, pleading with our midwife in my head. “I know my body can’t handle it, but I’m talking about my ego. We ended on such a good note in college. My ego is like a soft little cuddly bunny that wouldn’t hurt anybody—like the Easter bunny. We don’t want to hurt the Easter bunny, do we?”

There’s only one exercise for me that’s worse than touching my toes. It’s called the butterfly. Nice name for such a cruel invention. The goal is simple. You sit on your butt, put your feet together so their bottoms are flat against each other, and pull your feet as close to your groin as you can, so in effect, your knees stick out from your body like butterfly wings. Poetic, isn’t it?

Next, using your hands or the inside of your elbows, you push your knees as far as you can downward to the mat underneath you, stretching your groin.

The whole experience for me is like prying open a clamshell. You literally have to break the joint holding the two shells together in order to open a clam. The difference is clams are dead. I was not. Not to mention, we are talking about stretching a particularly sensitive part of the male anatomy.

I didn’t look like a butterfly. I looked like a junior-high boy, balled up for a cannonball about to hit the water.

I couldn’t help but gape at the other women, their bellies light as balloons, fluttering their legs like happy butterflies. I imagined them all laughing and flapping their legs, slowly lifting themselves off their mats and flying away into the cool Mediterranean sky.

The instructor walked slowly around the room observing each of the women. Much to my appreciation, she walked past me without as much as a casual glance, which I can only guess was because of one of two reasons. Either she thought about the fact that I’m a guy and won’t be giving birth, so I don’t really count anyway, or more likely she realized I was a lost cause and

couldn't be bothered with my piddly efforts. Either way, she continued on to where April was sitting and stopped.

April looked bored. She had her knees pinned to the mat with her hands, and occasionally she would flap her knees and do the stretch all over again just for fun.

"In some cases," the instructor said, "some people are too flexible for this particular stretch. You're one of those people. Let me show you the stretch I use. I think it will be more effective for you."

Things got entirely out of hand by the end of the workout. Yes, I was sweating. Yes, I was feeling a burning sensation in many muscles I didn't want to know I had. Yes, my pride was worth as much as a handful of Zimbabwean dollars. But up until this point I had avoided pain.

For our last exercise, our instructor asked us to shake out our arms and shoulders, loosen them up a bit, then one at a time rotate our arms like windmills.

I started with my right arm, and everything went well. The room filled with a flurry of body parts. We switched to our left arm, and everyone began again. I was really getting into this stretch. I could feel my shoulder stretching. As my arm spun faster and faster like a ceiling fan, I focused on relaxing the muscles in my arm, then my rib cage, and finally the shoulder itself. The muscles expanded even more. I felt in complete control of my body.

That's when the clicking began. It sounded like chopsticks breaking or like the pulse of an electric fence if you've ever put your ear close and listened. It sounded painful, and it was. The clicking sound was coming from my shoulder. I didn't know whether to stop flailing my arm or not, so I kept doing it, hoping the problem would work itself out.

It only got worse. Now the clicking sounded like a hammer

on a nail, and people started looking around the room trying to find out where the clicking sound was coming from.

Of course I stopped. I gave up. I rubbed my shoulder. I looked at these women, cheerfully carrying around their sand bags, fluttering their knees like butterflies, whirling their arms like propellers, happy to be in training for the race ahead. And that's when I knew—as if I didn't know before—that there was good reason April was pregnant, and I was not.

29 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

What's a Onesie?

“It's like an undershirt for babies,” April said as she folded up a little pink shirt with frills around the sleeves and “little princess” written in blue cursive on the front.

“Okay,” I said. I looked at the little white gown I was holding in my hand and placed it on the onesie pile.

“What's a sleeper?” I asked.

April glared at me. “It's what babies sleep in,” she said.

I rummaged through the bag of clothes sitting on the floor in front of me until I found something that looked comfortable to sleep in. It had booties, which seemed right, and written again in cursive under a pink butterfly it said, “daddy's little girl.” I liked this one.

“And which size goes where again?” I asked, looking at the piles of clothes sitting on the coffee table. They all looked the same. They all looked small.

Kelly, a friend visiting from Madrid, pointed at the piles and said, “0-3 months go here, and 3-6 months go there.”

I checked the tag. “3 months,” it said.

“What if it says 3 months?” I asked. “3 months could go on either the 0-3 month pile or the 3-6 month pile.”

Kelly held out her hand, and I passed her the jacket. She held it up to get a look at it and said, “Definitely 0-3 months.” She put the jacket on the pile.

“This one says size 56!” I said. It was the smallest green tank top I had ever seen.

Kelly smiled and reached across the coffee table. I handed it to her.

30 WEEKS, 3 DAYS

Why People Have Kids

If someone had asked me why we decided to start having kids, I would have said, “It just seemed like the right thing to do.” Yeah, I realize how nonchalant that sounds, but sometimes the feeling that something is right is all a person needs.

Over the last few months, I’ve seen this feeling, like a planted seed, grow into something rooted, something leafy, something nourishing. Already, I can’t imagine my life without our baby girl. She’s developed into a person of her own, already capable of kicking her dad’s hand when he’s chasing her around mom’s belly. Today when I asked myself why we decided to start having kids, I realized that although we had started with a feeling, now our feelings had sprouted into a much clearer image of the family we hoped to be.

The easiest way for me to describe this image was to think of a few reasons people might have kids and cross off the ones that didn’t fit. For some reason, defining who I am not is always easier than defining who I am.

We are not having kids because...

The world is a great place to be born, free of crime, poverty and war. I feel much worse about the world these days reading on the BBC about what’s happening in Israel and

Palestine. I hate that I don't know what to do about this conflict except watch and pray that it will end soon.

We're financially stable and feel like we can give our kids everything they need. Supposedly, I make enough money to support both of us, our student loans, and the pregnancy on an entry-level web design job. In reality, we eat a lot of rice and beans at the end of the month.

Everyone else is having babies. This may be true for our friends in the small towns in Iowa where April and I grew up, but at age 26, our friends in the city are happy to be single. They're still being kids, not having them.

I'd like to give my kids the life I never had. Fact is, I've had a great life. No complaints. I have no idea what a "great life" will mean for my kids. I think they'll have to figure that out for themselves.

I need an heir to take over the family business. I still don't know what I'm going to be when I grow up. Any ideas?

So, if I take money, power and happiness out of the equation, what am I left with?

What comes to mind are the words of a wise friend of mine. He's my parents' age. We haven't talked in years, but he was someone I could talk to when I was in high school. Occasionally we would grab a coffee from the coffee shop in town and go for a drive, and he would listen to me go on about God and girls and leaving for college.

This friend always had the most predictable answer for everything in life. He would take a sip of his coffee, ponder my questions, and say, "Life is about relationships." That's the only thing I really remember from all our conversations, but it's why I think he's wise because today when I asked myself why I wanted kids, my answer was, "Because life is about relationships."

The kind of relationship a parent has with a child doesn't

come around very often. They're the exception. They're the limited edition. They're like a good bottle of wine, a gaze at the Grand Canyon, or a first kiss.

Granted, once April and I have kids, we won't be able to get rid of them. We take that chance. But in exchange we'll get the whole works. In the end, we'll spend more time with our parents and children and grandchildren than anyone else on the planet. We'll talk more openly and more directly with our kids, even if it takes us years, because if we don't, we'll rot like bad fruit. And whether we love our kids or hate them or ignore them, we will still be central characters in their story.

To be family is to be in the most intense kind of relationship there is. To be family is to be a witness to someone's life and to bring meaning to it.

30 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

It Takes A Village to Raise a Child

I really thought the reason we came to Madrid this weekend was so April could do research for her thesis. However, as we sat on a park bench at the playground in Plaza Olavide watching dads push their kids on swings and little boys tumble down the slide together and land in a pile at the bottom, I wondered if we had come here for another kind of research.

I had tagged along with April this morning for a visit to an intercultural mediation group. Afterwards, we had some time to kill, so we got a map from the tourist office and sat down on a bench. We found ourselves looking at the map of the city with our baby eyes, pointing out the neighborhoods and squares where we remembered seeing families with kids while we were living in Madrid.

We followed our map down the streets of Madrid like a baby compass until we wandered into Plaza Olavide and got held up by a traffic jam of baby buggies. The sound of children playing on the playground was as welcoming as chirping seagulls at the beach, and at the same time, I was overwhelmed with loneliness. April's classes had ended eight weeks ago, and most of our Masters friends had scattered as suddenly as if a bag of pasta had been knocked on the floor.

All the pregnancy books say it's best to fight the urge to make any major life changes during pregnancy, so even though we no longer had any reason to stay living in Castellón, we had decided to stay put for our own sanity until the baby was born. Still, I was haunted by the abyss of uncertainty at the end of this adventure. The future was a black hole, a bottomless pit.

In contrast, Madrid was concrete and tangible. My heart ached to see all these families living here. Obviously they had decided that they belonged in this spot, and that they had claimed this playground as their own. I wanted a place to imagine my family.

April and I talked at the playground, and later at our friends' apartment, with the same intensity as when we had started dating. I felt like we were getting to know ourselves again for the first time, now as parents.

We had originally talked about moving anywhere where April could begin her career in mediation after she finished her studies. Now, starting a career with a newborn sounded overly ambitious. Moving to a place where we had never lived sounded isolating. We were starting a family, and it didn't make sense to try to start a career or find a new community at the same time, especially when we already had jobs and a supportive community waiting for us in Madrid.

April and I had moved around a lot. We hadn't lived in the same spot for more than two years. Each move provided a chance to start over again and see the world from a different

angle. Now that our little one was on the way, however, I was beginning to understand what people meant when they said they were settling down. It meant they recognized that they wouldn't have as much time for themselves when they had kids, and instead of having time to move to interesting places and find new jobs and build new friendships, they were going to have to rely on what they already had, so that they could focus most of their time on their family.

I was beginning to think of Madrid as solid ground we could build on.

So, we've decided to move back to Madrid. After the baby is born, the plan is to spend four months in Iowa with our families before I start back at my old job in Madrid as one of the pastors at an international church. My office will be at home, and April will be a stay-at-home mom, at least for a little while.

I guess technically we've followed the advice of the pregnancy books and resisted the urge to make any major life changes during pregnancy, but as soon as the baby is born, our life is going to look a lot like a mobile dangling over a crib—lots of moving parts. Hopefully the end result is we will be in a place where we already have jobs and friends and plenty of time to get to know our little girl.

31 WEEKS

Monkeys as Blue as Superman Ice Cream

Our friends Robyn and Samuel and their one-and-half-year-old Josiah are staying with us for two weeks.

They've lived in Spain for a couple of years and recently relocated to Seville. If there's one thing you should know about Seville it's that it's the last place on earth you would want to be

in August because of the heat. It's like a prison. The only way to survive is to lock yourself in your room, pull the shades, and sit in front of the fan.

So, when August rolls around, people in Seville scatter like pigeons. They get buddy-buddy with their friends who live on the coast.

Lucky for us, we happen to be those friends. Samuel and Robyn will be staying with us, and then moving on to our other friends Jesús and Rachel, who also live on the Spanish coast.

Yesterday I went to the library to get movies and Robyn came along. We walked in the front door and Robyn said, "I'll be in here," pointing at the "Kids Books" sign.

I went upstairs, spent about as much time to find a movie as it would take to watch *7 Years in Tibet* because I'm incredibly indecisive about these sorts of things, and finally returned to the ground floor to find Robyn. I half expected her to be asleep at one of the reading tables or to have simply given up on me and walked home.

Instead, I found her standing next to one of the reading tables with a pile of books equal to the stack on April's desk for her Masters thesis. Robyn was flipping through a picture book, completely engaged.

I almost didn't want to interrupt. She looked fascinated. But she saw me at the door, so I walked over.

"Did you find anything?" I asked, looking once again at the stack of children's books.

"I found all kinds of books," she said, "even Samuel's favorite." I noticed she mentioned Samuel, her husband, not Josiah, her toddler.

She picked up the book, the title was *Where's My Mother?*, and began paging through the glossy pages of green crocodiles with red button eyes, monkeys as blue as superman ice cream, and pudgy elephants, tiptoeing in front of a violet sky.

We checked out the books with my card, and I handed them to Robyn as we left the building. Something about the exchange of books from my hands to hers felt unsettling, like one of us had just gotten off the teeter-totter.

Here I was holding two DVDs that were, at best, “just okay,” and Robyn was holding children’s books. That’s when it slapped me in the face. Robyn was holding the very essence of childhood—innocence, curiosity, simplicity, playfulness—in her hands, in tangible form, like some kind of Rosetta Stone.

Robyn read from *Where’s My Mother?* as we walked home, reciting its poetry from memory. It was obvious that she had studied these words until they had made sense to her again, until she was a fluent speaker in the mysterious languages of childhood that I had lost when the dust of adulthood had settled.

I wanted the book too, like one toddler grabbing a toy from another. I wanted to hold this key to childhood in my hand, to see it and use it, to unlock the most childish and foolish parts of me.

Like most, I suppose, I’ve spent a lot of time trying to be a grown up, trying to be professional and put together. But wasn’t there always plenty of time for that? As I listened to Robyn read, I felt like I had been missing out on being childish again. I wanted to play too.

Children’s books make us like children again, but how much more do our own children who beg us to jump on the bed and blow bubbles and stick out our tongues? They give us an excuse to be all these beautiful things that children are.

31 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

Fireflies

“Do you ever get sick of talking about being pregnant?”
Kim asked.

Kim and April sat chatting at the kitchen table while I pushed chapati dough around in a skillet and watched it make bubbles.

“No,” April said, “I don’t talk about it that much.”

April and I don’t actually talk about being pregnant that much, at least not as much as I expected. Sometimes, especially in the first few months, we talked about being pregnant so little I forgot about it completely.

A few months ago I was talking to my dad about what we could do while my parents were visiting, and I said, “Well, we could go to the amusement park. April and I love roller coasters.”

My dad hesitated, thinking out loud. “I don’t think you can ride roller coasters when you’re pregnant.”

“Oh, right,” I said. I didn’t add, “Funny, I actually forgot April was pregnant there for a minute. Oops!”

I think God gave pregnant women big bellies for people like me. Pregnant bellies are like giant sticky notes.

Anyway, I would have answered Kim’s question differently than April did. In fact, I did. I said I wasn’t sick of talking about the pregnancy because our conversations were constantly changing as we tried to keep up with the little baby growing in April’s belly. We discussed the pregnancy test, then our first doctor’s appointment, then the ultrasound, then finding a midwife, then childbirth class, then picking baby names, and now we were already in the last trimester, and theoretically, we were supposed to be prepared to have a baby at any time.

When April and I get a chance to talk about the baby, I feel like it’s more of a necessity than a pastime. I feel like I’m cramming for a big exam, and believe me, there are some big baby handbooks out there. I have one sitting right next to me here on the nightstand. It’s called *The Baby Book*. I think it probably weighs more than most babies at birth.

If I could change my thinking, though, I’d do it. When I was a kid, and my family would visit my grandparents on their farm

in Illinois, my brother and sister and I used to run outside at dusk with canning jars and catch fireflies. We would put the jars next to our beds, and after pulling on our pajamas and turning off the lights, we would lie in our beds and watch the fireflies dance.

I'd like to think that each conversation we have about our beautiful little girl and her journey into this world is like catching one more firefly in a jar. We collect these glowing embers, pieces of the mystery and the miracle of birth, and we somehow try to contain them in our words, even if just for one night, to see them up close.

31 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Heat

I woke up this morning, wandered into the living room, and found April sleeping on the couch with the door to the balcony open and a fan blowing on her face.

I got the hint that April was feeling warmish a few weeks ago when she began taking cold showers during the night. I'd wake up in the dim light of morning to the sound of water running through the pipes.

Then there was the day April cried. She was at her desk collecting thoughts about her thesis in a Word document, and she overheated. Tears sizzled on her cheeks as she sat in silence.

She had been so brave about the whole thing, choosing not to complain, but instead to get creative about how to stay cool. I just knew today she had had enough. With all this heat, she was wondering how she would ever finish writing her thesis by her due date on October 3.

We tried to make things better. Friday afternoon we headed down to the beach with our friend Amy who was visiting from

Madrid. We've gotten in the habit of going to the beach later in the day, after six o'clock, so we can enjoy the coolness of a tempered sun and the welcome breeze from the sea.

We soaked in the water and napped on our towels. I woke up refreshed, but April woke up worse than before. The problem was she was supposed to be cool on the beach. I was cool. Amy was cool. The breeze was undeniably present, hushing the heat, but it wasn't enough. April's skin felt like a warm washcloth.

As we waited for the bus to go home, an older woman reached into her purse and took out a Spanish fan. With the flip of her wrist, she spread the fan, like peacock feathers, and began waving it in her face.

April smiled. Maybe there was hope after all. The thought of buying a fan at the dollar store was enough of a boost that Saturday morning April woke up with determination. She looked feisty.

April had decided that we would not go to our usual weekend breakfast place. Instead, we would go to the Teapot, a pleasant little café in a square only a few blocks away. We arrived, and immediately I knew what April had in mind. This café had cold air for sale.

We walked past tables of people inside the café reading their morning newspaper and sat for hours under the air conditioner. April contentedly sipped her drink and said we would have to come again.

Today is Monday. April and I look forward to Mondays because for two hours in the evening we get to go to our childbirth class in an air conditioned building. We count on it.

Walking into that building is like flipping a switch. We turn off temperature. We take it out of the equation. We chat. We exercise. We discuss baby things. The thought never crosses our mind that we are hot or cold. To think that somewhere

someone is letting something as unobtrusive as air get in the way of having a good day seems silly.

So this afternoon we walked to class with as much purpose as explorers headed for the North Pole. We arrived to find our midwife standing outside the front door of the building. She was leaning against her car. She looked hot.

She was talking to one of the women in our class and telling her that we would not be having class this evening because she had some family business to take care of. She said goodbye, got in her car, and drove off.

The two of us were left standing there in the street, and suddenly I felt very warm. In fact, I felt hotter than I had felt all summer. Standing in that small street between buildings, I felt like a piece of bread wedged in a toaster. I was sweating like cheese.

At that moment I understood how April had been feeling all week: too hot to do anything, and too hot to do anything about it.

“Well, I know one thing,” April said, matter-of-factly, “we’ll have to go find air conditioning somewhere else tonight.”

I was melting like ice cream, but April was considering our options. She had been hot all week, and now was no exception. She had put up with being a few degrees hotter than everyone else in the room. She had put up with a meltdown and being too hot to do anything about it. She had put up with finding any way she could to stay cool. As a result, she was handling it. She seemed okay.

April took my hand in hers, and we began walking down the street.

“Come on,” she said, “let’s go to the Teapot and drink tea under the air conditioner.”

32 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Camino de Santiago

“If I told you giving birth wasn’t painful, I would be lying to you.”

I should have thought something was up when our midwife said this. I think she was trying to give a disclaimer for the VHS tape she was putting in the VCR.

The film appeared in black in white on a small television sitting on a shelf in a cupboard at one end of our classroom. April and I sat with two other women on folding chairs.

The only reason I could think of that they would show us such an outdated film was because in the old days they would show things they wouldn’t show anymore.

The film began with a pleasant image of a pregnant English woman walking through a pasture in the evening wearing a wool sweater and softly rubbing circles on her belly.

In a matter of minutes, however, the English woman was strapped to a hospital bed, bracing herself, and howling at the moon. She made Neve Campbell in *Scream* sound like a kitten. From the next room, you wouldn’t have known if we were watching a birthing video or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The close-up of the baby’s head emerging from inside his mother did not help matters. I caught myself about to say out-loud, “Go back inside! This isn’t working!”

But, of course, over time with lots of pushing and panting and pleading the baby was squeezed into this world. The camel had passed through the eye of the needle.

I had the thought I imagine every new father has but doesn’t say, “How did that come from there?”

Pain. That’s how.

I'm not sure if this will sound far-fetched, but the only way I feel okay about sending my wife into the painful experience of childbirth and not scheduling a c-section tomorrow is thinking about April and I walking the Camino de Santiago together last summer.

The Camino de Santiago is a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in the northern province of Galicia in Spain. People have walked to this town from all over the world for centuries, and last summer April and I walked around twelve miles a day for eleven days through rain and sunshine, from morning until evening, and through forests, mountains and villages to reach our final destination.

Walking to Santiago is one of my most cherished experiences, but only because it was also one of the most difficult April and I have ever done together. Within two days, April was limping because of a bad knee, and I was hobbling on a sore arch. We spent hours each morning sticking band-aids, wrapping ankles, running needle and thread through blisters and massaging cramped muscles. We experienced pain from the beginning of the trip to the end. It never let up. We often thought about giving up and taking the bus home, and at least once every day we said we would never do this again.

Somehow, though, God uses difficult situations to bring people together. He's like a beggar rummaging through the trash until he finds something he can use. I am thankful for the opportunity I had to see April persevere through such a physically demanding adventure. We helped each other along the way, sometimes arm in arm, sometimes just walking side by side in silence, but somehow growing closer together and learning so much about each other, including the simple fact that we could do it. We could walk all that way.

I trust April will handle the pain of childbirth okay because I've seen her handle pain before. I know she can do it. And I imagine going through the difficulty of childbirth with our baby girl will only bring us all closer together.

33 WEEKS

Wedding Ring

“Do you wear a wedding ring?” my friend Rogier asked me on Friday. Rogier is the father of three.

I showed him the white gold band around my finger.

“I only have one piece of advice for you when your wife goes into labor,” Rogier said. “Don’t wear your wedding ring.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Rogier held up his hand with the shiny gold band around one finger. He took his other hand and squeezed it around his left hand, his ring disappearing behind his knuckles.

“It hurts,” Rogier said, “when your wife is having contractions, and she grabs your hand.” He smiled and raised his eyebrows as if to say, “You’ll see.”

“Trust me. When your wife is in that much pain, the last thing you’re going to say to her is ‘Honey, you’re squeezing my hand, and it hurts.’”

33 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Benchwarmers

Justin sat back in his chair and sighed. “I don’t sleep well anymore,” he said.

I laughed. “Me neither.”

“It’s like my body knows the baby is coming,” Justin said.

You would have thought we were two pregnant women commiserating, but in fact, our pregnant wives were sitting at the table next to us.

We met up with our friends Justin and Jen at a conference we're attending. They're our age and also having their first.

Naturally, when the rest of our friends at the conference got sick of us blabbing on and on about being pregnant and found better things to do with their time, we found ourselves—the four parent wannabes—walking over to the dining hall together and talking shop.

April and Jen launched into a conversation about how hot it is everywhere, and to be fair, Europe is toasty this summer, while Justin and I sat down at a table with our trays of food, not quite sure where to begin.

Being the husband, I imagine, is a lot like being a benchwarmer for Real Madrid. Of course you're an important person if you play for one of the most decorated soccer teams in the world. Not only are you kicking the ball around with the likes of Casillas and Raúl and Sergio Ramos, the list goes on, but you work hard with them in practice and, in a way, you keep them in shape for the big games.

But, you're a benchwarmer. When it comes down to it, you're not the one running out onto the field.

Especially now that we're in the last minutes of the game, or the last trimester of the pregnancy, I can see how different April's experience is from mine. Every day she plays more of the game, lugging her belly around, dodging mood swings, anticipating snack times, and pacing herself. She is the star, and she deserves every bit of credit for how hard she plays.

Still, it was nice to see Justin, a benchwarmer just like me.

We talked about our experiences of the pregnancy, and I began to see that somewhere along the line the pregnancy had

changed us too. We were becoming dads. We had just been too busy watching the game to notice.

34 WEEKS, 6 DAYS

Castor Oil

“Castor oil and a long walk worked every time,” Kari said. “I was in labor by the end of the day.”

Kari is a friend of ours, and an expert at having babies—she had five. Not only did she have five babies, but she also had five boys, all of which had her waddling by four months. Her first baby was nine and a half pounds, and they only got bigger from there. By her third she had discovered a sure-fire way to self-induce labor. Drink a bottle of castor oil and go for a long walk. Two weeks before her due date, she would self-induce, just before her boys would bulk up.

April was only five months pregnant when Kari gave us her family recipe for self-inducing labor, and I remember not paying much attention to it at the time. It seemed almost irrelevant then, in the same way my older sister used to tell me when I was in grade school that someday I would like girls. Like that would ever happen!

Today, however, is a different story. I’m sitting here on our balcony enjoying the evening breeze off the Mediterranean, and I’m thinking about castor oil.

The problem is I want my daughter to be here now. I don’t want to wait. And it’s so much worse that she’s right there in April’s belly. I’m the little kid eyeing his present under the tree, who can’t wait for Christmas morning. The only difference is I’m an adult, and I’m capable of devising all kinds of elaborate plots to get our baby out faster.

I keep trying to remind myself that babies know when

they're supposed to come. As a rule, hurrying things up is a bad idea. And, as much as I hate to say it, waiting is good for me. John Ortberg says, "Waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be."

I can't help it though. April and I already take long walks together every day. The only thing I'd have to do is slip some castor oil into her orange juice in the morning.

35 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

Hospital

We visited the hospital yesterday. Well, first we had to find it. Our doctor had told us we would be having the baby at the private hospital since we had private health insurance. What she didn't tell us was where the private hospital was, and we never thought to ask. I guess it never occurred to us that we didn't even know where the hospital was until we decided to go there.

Thankfully only two hospitals were listed in the phone book, and one of them was called "The General Hospital." We decided to go to the other one.

Maybe you're wondering how we got this far along in the pregnancy without knowing where the hospital was. You might say we were being irresponsible.

Of course we were. We were purposely avoiding the hospital. We had discovered recently that too much information could be a bad thing, and as a result, we had adopted a new family policy: What you don't know can't hurt you.

It all started a few weeks back at the dinner table when I made the mistake of asking April, "What's your worst fear about giving birth?" and then she told me, and we both felt like we had been dragged into an alley and beaten up.

I wished at that moment that April hadn't read all those

pregnancy books. Now she had more opinions than she knew what to do with, and instead of being helpful, these opinions had brought into focus an image of the ideal birth that could never be. April had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

April's worst fear was that she would be "stuck" on the operating table and not be allowed to move around or try different positions to help give birth, which her books told her would either lead to extreme unnecessary pain or worse, a c-section.

April began talking about her worst fear constantly, and I felt increasingly more responsible and helpless. Deep down, I knew there was very little I could do to change the situation. Ultimately, the doctor would make the decision, and here in Spain, that meant giving birth on an operating table.

We were destined to fail.



We arrived at the hospital with a long list of questions, but I was aware that we really only needed the one question answered. We had decided to visit the hospital in the end because our fear had cornered us, and we had no choice but to look it in the eye. Our due date was coming, and we needed to know which hospital to go to and what would happen when we got there.

At the front desk I told the secretary we would be having our baby at this hospital and asked if we could have a look around.

"You mean a tour?" she asked. "We're not a travel agency."

"Um...okay" I said. "So I guess taking a tour of this hospital is not something people normally do?"

"No," she said, "that is not something people normally do."

I thought for a second.

“Well, we’re not from here,” I said. “We’re not familiar with how hospitals work here. Do you think you can ask someone if we can take a tour, or even if we can just see one of the hospital rooms where new mothers would stay?”

She bit her lip trying not to smirk. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She picked up the phone. “Yeah. I have some people here who want to see a room.” She listened, then looked at me. “Alright. I’ll send them up.”

She put down the phone.

“Second floor.”



We stepped off the elevator and walked to the nurse’s station. One of the nurses met us at the counter with a smile and asked, “Are you the ones who would like to see the maternity suite?”

“Yes,” we said.

“Alright. Follow me.”

She unlocked a door at the end of the hall, and we followed her into the suite. There was a small living room and a door that led into a bedroom. The couch along the wall converted into a bed. There was plenty of room.

“Anything else?” the nurse asked after we had taken a few moments to look around.

I frowned. Whatever it was we were looking for, it wasn’t here.

“Can we see the delivery room?” I asked.

“No, I’m sorry,” the nurse apologized. “We can’t allow that.”

As soon as she said the words, I realized the reason we had come to the hospital was to see the delivery room. That was the room April was afraid of, and that’s where we would find our

fears growing like mold in a forgotten Tupperware. Our fears were sealed in the delivery room two floors beneath us, and we had no way of doing battle with them. We were stuck.

We did have the nurse, however, and she had been in the delivery room before. And we still had our question, and she probably had an answer.

"I do have one question," I said as I pulled a small notebook from my back pocket and flipped through the pages.

The nurse smiled.

"Do women normally give birth on an operating table at this hospital?"

"Yes."

"So they have to stay in their beds the whole time?"

"Yes"

"And they're not allowed to change positions or get up and move around?"

"That's right."

I stopped and looked at April. I had no more questions. I wished I had more—some way of asking our way out of the inevitable truth that April's worst fear had become a reality and that there was nothing I could do about it.

"Any more questions?" the nurse asked as she walked over to the door.

April bit her lip and shook her head fiercely as the tears cut jagged lines across her cheeks.

36 WEEKS

Handbook to Bad Parenting

I'm all about bad parenting books because most of the time after reading something utopian like *The Baby Book*, I feel like the best April and I could do is the moment the baby is born,

bundle her up in swaddling clothes and hand her off to the nuns at the convent down the street. Let *them* do God's work on the child.

Anne Lamott is a favorite. Of course her son Sam is in college now, but when he was born, she wrote *Operating Instructions*, which is exactly what I was looking for—an unedited, unpolished, un-the-way-things-*should*-be kind of baby book—and I love it. Why? Because there's something comforting, something so warm and snugly like being wrapped in a receiving blanket about knowing that someone else is more messed up than I am—even if I'm close.

Just for fun, here are a few lines from Lamott's book:

I'm so tired that I could easily go to sleep at 8:30 and sleep for twelve hours, but instead I walk the sobbing baby and think my evil thoughts—Lady Macbeth as a nanny.

The worst night yet...If I had a baseball bat, I would smash holes in the wall.

Real tears leave his eyes now. It is almost more than I can take. Before, he'd be sobbing but there were no tears. Now there are. It seems an unfair advantage.

I'm not even remotely well enough to be a mother. That's what the problem is. Also, I don't think I like babies.

Another favorite is dooce.com by Heather Armstrong. Even before April and I were thinking about having kids, when I really had nothing in common with a stay-at-home mother from Utah, I was reading Heather's blog and marveling over how very

terrifying parenthood really is. Heather says it all, and then she laughs...and then you laugh. It's amazing.

And so, I thought, maybe today I would give you some bad parenting. It's my first shot. Unfortunately, I probably won't swear as eloquently as Anne Lamott or tell you off as well as Heather Armstrong could. But, I can tell you the truth.

The truth is that for me this past week has been the hardest week of the pregnancy so far. Something about going to the hospital last Thursday put everything in motion. Before that point, the pregnancy was theoretical. It looked good on paper. But once April and I were standing there together in the maternity suite, I knew this was for real, and I felt like Atlas carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Part of the burden is I want to be a human shield for my pregnant wife. She goes around the house with her bumper belly looking cute and cuddly like a puppy or a hamster that needs to be held and fed and pampered. Don't get me wrong. She's a big girl. She's handling all of this better than I am. But I feel like I need to protect her from the world, and I just can't do it. By the end of the day, I'm wrung out like a washcloth. All I'm good for is watching TV.

I also feel like having a baby is all about logistics and meeting an ambitious deadline. It's like being the Stage Manager for the next Broadway show. I'm responsible for making sure the lights are working, the props are in place, the actors are happy and know their lines, and that the right people are there to see opening night.

Okay, I'm not sure a Stage Manager does all those things, but the fact is I feel like I have to be an administrative genius to have a baby. And if there's one thing you should know about me, it's that I'm not very good at doing more than one thing at once.

I don't want to be overwhelmed. I want to be strong and in control. I feel weak because April is handling the last few weeks of the pregnancy better than me, which seems backwards.

I wanted to be able to protect April from her fears and anxieties about giving birth, but finally I've had to shimmy the white flag up the pole and admit that I don't actually have much control over the end of the pregnancy. I can't guarantee the birth will go well, and I can't stop April from worrying.

So, this afternoon I did the only thing left I know how to do. I went to the beach looking for Jesus. I left April reading a book on her towel and went for a walk along the water. The waves washed away my cluttered thoughts so I could listen better, and there was Jesus waiting for me, like he always does, which is why I trust him.

I stopped to watch a little girl, doggie paddling out to sea. She looked helpless against the waves that lifted her up and down. At times she disappeared completely out of sight. Still, she didn't look worried, but determined. She was confident that her dad, who reclined nearby on his towel reading a novel, would be at her side in an instant if she cried, "Daddy!"

I guess I just needed to know that the further that April and I got from shore, Jesus was still there watching us, capable of being at our side in an instant. I laughed to myself as I imagined Jesus as David Hasselhoff in *Baywatch* running shirtless in red swimming trunks down the beach to our rescue.

36 WEEKS, 6 DAYS

Hurricanes and Puppy Love

I had two dreams last night.

Dream One: The Hurricane

In my first dream April and I were hiking with a group of

people to the top of a volcano on a deserted island. April was eight months pregnant, like she is in real life, and seemed to be keeping up with the rest of the group, even though the island itself was like a pile of rocks tangled in jungle brush.

Near the top of the volcano the wind changed directions. I couldn't make out what the people hiking in front of me were saying, but I could tell they were worried about something.

In a matter of minutes the wind was blowing so strongly we could barely keep our footing. The sky began churning overhead and the water turned black. We were in a hurricane.

Everyone in the group began climbing faster and looking for shelter from the storm. We scattered off in different directions, each thinking only of self-preservation.

The ground underneath my feet began to shake, and suddenly I was seized with fear. I had left April behind. Just as I looked over my shoulder and saw her bracing herself between two rocks, the ground between us crumbled, literally splitting the island into two halves.

April began to cry as both halves of the island began slowly drifting apart, the canyon between us growing impossibly wide.

Dream Two: Puppy Love

April and I were in Madrid visiting our friend Mathilda whose dog was giving birth. Her dog's name is Kim, and she's a poodle.

Kim was giving birth in a hospital like most women do in Spain. She had an IV in her arm. Her contractions were being monitored.

Nothing about this seems unusual, except that she looked ridiculously small to be in that hospital bed.

Mathilda stood next to Kim, telling her to push, wiping the sweat off her forehead, and tightly holding Kim's small little paw in her fist.

The doctor was about to deliver the baby when he said, "I

need someone to catch the baby.” He looked around the room. “Now!” he said. Everyone looked at me, so I stepped forward.

Kim pushed once more, whimpered, and the baby slid into my hands. “It’s a girl,” the doctor said and cut the umbilical cord.

I cradled the puppy in my arms and noticed how blood-shot her eyes were. It didn’t matter. She was the cutest puppy in the world.

Observations:

1. Laurie is staying with us for a week before she heads to Philadelphia to begin her next job as a history teacher. Last night before we went to bed she called her parents in Florida to see if they had evacuated for Hurricane Ernesto.
2. Yesterday, out of the blue, April asked me, “Are you afraid of me going into labor?”
3. April says I may be feeling guilty for thinking puppies are cuter than babies, which is true by the way. I do think puppies are cuter than babies, hands down.

Care to interpret?

37 WEEKS, 1 DAY

Margo

I made the mistake of telling our friend Margo a few days ago that we still hadn’t figured out how we were going to get to the hospital when April went into labor. Not to say that Margo didn’t have a right to be concerned, to be visibly but politely fascinated by our lack of preparation less than three weeks before our due date. April and I talked as if it was the first time we had even thought about how we were going to get to the hospital.

We don’t own a car, I pointed out, so maybe we should call

for a taxi. But then again, the taxi service has never been very reliable in Castellón, especially not early in the morning.

“Maybe we’ll walk,” April suggested.

Margo’s eyes went round.

Ever since that day, the day April mentioned waddling to the hospital, Margo’s been telling us how laid back we are about everything. She says she could never be like us because we don’t worry about things.

I don’t think it helped any when we invited Margo over for chocolate chip cookies last week and casually mentioned that our baby is going to sleep in a trunk.

“A what?” Margo asked, nearly choking on her cookie.

“A trunk,” I said. “You know. A container for holding things—in this case, a baby.”

“Here, I’ll show you,” April said. She and Margo walked to our bedroom at the other end of the apartment and looked at the trunk.

“Well, at least it doesn’t have a lid,” Margo pointed out, trying to be optimistic.

“Yeah, Kelly took it off with a screwdriver,” April replied.

Margo smiled apologetically.

“What?” April asked.

“I thought it was going to look like a little coffin,” she confessed.

Maybe Margo had a point. Maybe only laid-back people would put their baby to sleep in a trunk. It seemed sturdy to me.

But the thing is, I don’t feel laid back. I feel lots of things, but definitely not serenity, not peace of mind, not like I’ve been soaking in an Arabic bath or anything.

My list of descriptors sounds more like something you would read in the fine print at the bottom of a drug prescription. I don’t sleep well. I’m tired. I can’t concentrate. I’m even jumpy. I was stirring rice in the kitchen the other day when April came

up behind me, put her arms around my chest, and I sprang like a grasshopper.

I've never experienced an excitement and anticipation as strong as this one. I'm like a dog who hears the key in the lock.

And you know what, Margo helps. Her belief that I'm as calm as the Mediterranean is just what I need right now. I need to be lied to. Sometimes what we need is someone else to tell us that we are the thing we're not. Speaking it might just make it come true.

37 WEEKS, 6 DAYS

Babymoon

I was talking with my friend Jeannette recently. She has a two-year-old daughter. She was telling me that her daughter was born around Christmas time, and she and her husband had plans to spend Christmas Day with her family.

By the time Christmas Day came around, Jeannette wasn't looking forward to the day at all. She was tired from recovering from her pregnancy and taking care of the baby. All she wanted was her family to pamper her a little bit, but she just knew that when they arrived at her parents' house, everyone would want to see the baby, and no one would even notice her.

Sure enough, they arrived at Jeannette's parents' house, Grandma took the baby, and everyone crowded around. No one asked Jeannette how she was doing much less said hello to her.

Within a few minutes she left the room and cried out her frustration in the hallway.

Of course Jeannette was telling me her story two years after that Christmas Day, and she was laughing about it, laughing at herself for all the new feelings that come with being a new parent.



Saturday was my 27th birthday. April surprised me on Friday with a two-day trip to Valencia, which is the closest big city to where we live.

We love to travel. Some of our favorite memories together are weekend trips we've taken to different cities in Spain like Salamanca and Cuenca and Alicante. Since we've been pregnant, we haven't taken a weekend trip, so April figured this was our last chance to go for a weekend with just the two of us.

I was listening to a radio show yesterday called *The Parent's Journal*, and the person they were interviewing on the show actually had a name for this kind of trip. He called it a "babymoon" instead of a "honeymoon."

Since we moved near Valencia a year ago, I've been talking to April about going to this nature preserve called the Albufera Nature Park just outside of Valencia. This park is special because many of the birds that migrate between Africa and Northern Europe stop there during their trip.

I'm not a bird watcher. In fact, I would put most birds at this park into three self-named categories: bird, duck and stork. I don't really have any vocabulary beyond that. But, I'm always up for something new, so I thought it would be interesting to go and see the birds, and do as bird people do.

We've had a number of people tell us about this park. All of them have suggested the same itinerary:

1. Arrive at the park around lunchtime.
2. Have a paella, a traditional rice dish, on the beach.
3. Finally, go for a boat ride around the lake, preferably at sunset, and enjoy watching the birds.

We thought we would follow tradition, so we set off before lunch in search of a paella on the beach. To save money, we skipped the Bus Turístico and got on a local bus that was going to the same place, the Albufera Nature Park. The lady at the tourist office said there was really only one bus stop for the park, and we would know it when we saw it. However, as we began passing road signs that said we were already in the park and making a number of stops along the highway, I thought I better ask someone.

I like old people, so I asked the ones sitting in front of us. They were very helpful. The one lady in particular immediately began sketching maps in the air with a scurry of hand gestures, singing her directions with the authority of an opera soloist, and of course having no doubt in her mind that I was understanding everything she was saying, even though she was speaking Valenciano, a mixture of Spanish and French.

All we really needed to know, however, was that when she got off the bus at the next stop and beckoned for us to follow, we should get off the bus too.

With a hand on my shoulder, she led us down a dirt path to a restaurant.

“Eat here,” she said, wagging her finger at the restaurant.

“When you’re finished, go back to the highway and follow it to the stop light. There you will find the boats.”

She smiled at both of us, squeezed my arm once more for good measure, and said, “*Hasta luego*,” before walking off in the direction of the apartment building to our left.

April looked at the restaurant, then at the dirt path, and then at me.

“I don’t think we’re in the right place,” she said thoughtfully.

“I don’t see the beach.” She peered down the dirt path at the highway, busy with traffic.

“I don’t see the lake.” We both looked past the restaurant at

the sparse collection of apartment buildings that stretched my definition of a pueblo.

“And I don’t think this restaurant serves paella.” The restaurant looked more like a gas station with food. Three girls stood at the doorway licking ice cream.

This was the critical moment in our trip, where if I had had Doc Brown’s time-traveling De Lorean in *Back to the Future*, I would have set the dials on the dashboard to this moment. I would have gone back in time and told myself that the forecast for the future was no good and it was in our best interest to get back on the bus and go home.

Instead, we felt adventurous. It almost felt biblical, you know, like we were Mary and Joseph looking for a place to lay our heads. The only small difference was Mary and Joseph did actually know where they were going. They were from Bethlehem.

In contrast, we had the same lack of information as, say, Christopher Columbus, who set sail from Spain and thought he had reached India when he had actually reached the Americas.

We had the same fatalistic determination as Sir John Franklin and his fellow Englishmen who meant to find the Northwest Passage through North America’s Arctic Ocean, spurred on by their belief that “it’s gotta be just beyond that white part” and were found years later, preserved like flies in ice cubes, in excellent condition for the explorers after them to adequately document their failure.

We were also as fit for the adventure as Bill Bryson’s companion Katz was for the Appalachian Trail in *A Walk in the Woods*. I was breaking in new shoes, or more accurately, my new shoes were breaking me in. More importantly, April was eight-and-a-half-months pregnant. She waddles everywhere now, by the way.

All this to say, we were in much worse shape than we realized.



Back at the highway, two women at the bus stop confirmed that the boats were indeed just down the road and to the right, maybe a 10-minute walk.

We set off. We reached the intersection the older woman and the women at the bus stop had talked about, and to our relief, we could see the lake. It was right there on the other side of the highway, although somewhat fenced in by reeds and trees. *The boats must be very close*, we thought to ourselves.

We crossed the intersection and walked to the right, following the highway that ran along the lake. Like mail carriers in route, we walked purposefully down the highway. At least for twenty minutes or so, and then we hesitated. We put our hands on our hips. We felt the sun burning our backs. April looked tired like she had just carried a bag of concrete from the restaurant.

Still, there was that one building we could see just past the trees, maybe another ten minutes down the road. We'd come this far already. We had too much invested to turn around.

I questioned my judgment then, and I question my judgment now as the husband of a very pregnant wife walking down the shoulder of a busy highway. Images I had seen on TV of a highway patrolman standing on the side of the road writing up a ticket and getting hit by a pickup truck in oncoming traffic kept stamping my brain.

Even worse, we arrived at the building, and instead of being a small port with boats, it was a supply shed for the local fire department.

We no longer looked ambitious. We looked tired. We looked like two people who wished we were at home sitting

on the couch together watching a movie or reading a book. I wished it wasn't my birthday, and that it was just a normal day.

Like cars out of gas coasting into the station on fumes, we made our way back to the restaurant. The boats were out of the picture for the moment. We were thinking about survival now. We needed something to eat.

I felt like we were eating money at that restaurant. The food was expensive, the kind of expensive where the restaurant has nothing really to offer except that they're the only restaurant around, so you either eat there, or you eat nowhere. I also felt like I was eating money because money isn't food, and this food wasn't really food either. It tasted like paper greased by a thousand hands.

We didn't say much over lunch. We didn't think much either. We just sat there.

It's fair to say we really hadn't walked that long. Maybe an hour. But watching us walk that highway was like watching two ants cross a sidewalk. For any person, crossing a sidewalk is a matter of one or two steps. For those ants, it's like crossing the Sahara.

Eventually, we did find perspective, but not that day. That day I felt a lot like my friend Jeannette on Christmas Day, squeezing out tears in the hallway. I felt like I was at the funeral for my life as a married person without kids. When I was really worn out and feeling sorry for myself, I felt like our baby girl had stolen my birthday.

In *The Baby Book*, Dr. Sears says that weeks after the baby is born when you find yourself wild-eyed and haggard, stomping around your apartment saying you don't have time for a shower because "the baby NEEDS me," the right answer is, "The baby needs a healthy, happy, rested parent." In other words, don't push your limits.

That Saturday at the nature park, we found our limits.

I think it was a good idea to get away for a few days before the baby was born. I wouldn't change that. But the trip felt like detox. I felt like we had been bleached.

The problem was in all the romance of thinking about being new parents and the giddiness that made us want to "do something" to make the baby come, we had drained our batteries.

I decided we needed to take it easy. We needed to go for more walks. We needed to read a good book. April needed to take more naps. I don't think we'll go for another hike in the woods anytime soon. That was not a good idea.

Our motto this week has been, "There's nothing else that needs to happen before the baby is born." Our ducks are in a row, which brings us back to bird watching.

We did take a boat ride on the lake. I did have to ask for more directions from a lady hanging up laundry in her front yard, and we did have to walk an unmarked dirt path along a river to get there, but we found it. And when we did, there was this little old man with a fishing boat waiting at the end of the dock. We puttered around the lake, and the little old man threw seed to the birds.

39 WEEKS, 2 DAYS

Nice

Our friend Jitu is in town to give an intercultural seminar at the university. Jitu lives in Madrid, but he visits often, usually to submit paperwork for his visa or knock the dust off some books at the university library, and he always stays with us. I think it's safe to say we're a little protective of our time with Jitu. Not like we tether him to the coffee table or anything,

but we like having him in our home. It's possible we've started nesting early.

Okay, and I would be lying if I said it didn't have anything to do with his cooking. Every time he stays with us he makes chicken curry and chapati bread for lunch. We sit and eat all afternoon.

So this Wednesday when Jitu came to Castellón, he made arrangements to stay somewhere else. He was being considerate, so I didn't complain. I mean I wouldn't stay with someone five days before her due date either—except for my sister, actually. I did do that. But I didn't know what I was doing at the time.

Besides, we're probably a little moody too, like astronauts would be five days before launch date. We know as well as everyone else does that when this baby is born we will be jettisoned into a whole new life like we've landed on the moon.

Still, I'm getting a little sick of people being considerate. I'm tired of being self-absorbed. I don't like the fact that each day feels like a mental game of Jenga. And I wish I had the energy to actually do one nice thing for somebody.

So after the intercultural seminar, I was standing with Jitu in the hallway, and I felt the sudden urge to shed my pregnancy skin and do something nice.

"Come and have dinner at my house tonight," I said to Jitu.

I wasn't asking a question.

"No, no," Jitu said politely. He's Asian. He knows how to say no nicely.

"No, really" I said. "I want you to come to our house tonight."

Jitu laughed nervously, probably wondering why I looked so serious, and probably not quite sure what to do about that. Should he honor my wishes or send me home for bed rest?

Jitu thought for a moment, then grinned.

“We’ll stop by the grocery store,” he said, “and we’ll make Indian food for you at your place tonight.”

He seemed pleased with this compromise.

“No,” I said, shaking my head thoughtfully, “I want to make dinner for you.”

“We’ll just stop by the grocery store...” Jitu repeated, not quite sure why I wasn’t listening to him.

“I’ll make chili,” I said. “An American specialty for my friend from India.”

I smiled and sighed with relief.

It wasn’t going to be easy, but one way or another, I was going to do something nice.

39 WEEKS, 5 DAYS

Due Date

What are most couples doing the week of their due date if they are not having a baby? The answer is absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

My cell phone rang this afternoon, so I answered it.

“Kelly?”

“Yes,” I said. It was Encarna.

“Damián called earlier this afternoon, and you didn’t answer the phone,” she said. She sounded hurt.

How could I have played with her emotions this way? We could have been at the hospital having a baby for all she knew.

I’ve gotten into the habit this week of including in the subject line of my emails something like “no baby yet, this is just a normal email” to put everyone at ease.

Having a baby will be exciting, but it’s not exciting yet. There’s nothing to talk about, and nothing to do, except wait. And waiting by definition is the absence of doing anything at all. In

fact, the curious thing about waiting is that if you try to turn it into something to do, something active, time actually slows down. It freezes up. I'm pretty sure Einstein references this in his theory of relativity.

"A watched pot never boils," they say, and the more I think about the baby coming, the more my life begins to feel like a space montage from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one of the most slow moving films in cinematic history. It's actually not half bad if you watch it in fast forward.

So, even though today is two days before our due date, I got up and went to work like any other day. It was the best thing I could do. Unfortunately, the only real news I have to tell you is that things are about as normal and uneventful as possible. April and I are just sitting here twiddling our thumbs.

In fact, I'm quite sure Troy, our friend and colleague in Madrid, experienced the most boring phone call of his life this morning.

"Hi, this is Troy," he said.

"Hi Troy," I said.

"How are you?"

"Good."

"What are you up to?"

"Working."

"Any contractions yet?"

"Nope."

"Anything else that might possibly make this phone conversation more interesting?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"Hmmm...."

Okay, so Troy didn't say that last part, but he probably got off the phone and yawned.

So, what I can tell you is I'm going to bed now. Tomorrow

I'll get up, and I'll go to work again. And maybe, just maybe, we'll have a baby tomorrow. Now that would be exciting!

39 WEEKS, 6 DAYS, 5:13 AM

Contractions

April woke me early in the morning and told me her contractions had started. I jumped out of bed—Clark Kent, looking for the nearest phone booth.

After April convinced me to sit back down on the bed, she explained that I had already slept through hours of her lying awake trying to decide if the pain in her hip sockets meant today would be the day our baby was born.

We sat there wondering until April dozed off. Eventually I climbed back into bed, and we slept until the alarm clock went off.

I've never stopped to think about what heroes do when they're not saving people. I suppose they act like everyone else. Take firemen, for example. When they're not running through flames, they're probably feeding their cats, or jogging, or mowing their lawns. Most of the time, they're ordinary people.

I was ready to be a hero today. No, I had no plans of hacking apart a burning building with an ax, or even chasing a cat out of a tree, but I did want to take care of April while she was in labor.

What I didn't realize was that labor can take a long time, and while April has been in labor all day, there's not much we can do except be patient and carry on with our everyday lives until it's time to go to the hospital.

We went out for lunch to celebrate that April is in labor. Afterwards, April curled up on the couch with a book and fell asleep. There wasn't much else I could do, so I did what I do every other day: I went to work.

39 WEEKS, 6 DAYS, 7:03 PM

Evacuation Plan

We had an evacuation plan. Our suitcase was already sitting at the front door. The stopwatch was on the dresser in our bedroom, and as soon as the contractions were minutes apart, I would call Damián and Encarna to pick us up with their car. In the meantime, I would gather together a few last things like our toothbrushes and April's favorite pillow—all of which I had written down neatly in a list.

At least I thought we were prepared to leave the house until April's water broke. She had been napping on the couch all afternoon, then without warning she sat up and looked around—as if something had changed, she just didn't know what.

We heard a loud snap, like a twig breaking, and April screamed. She ran to the bathroom, and I followed yelling, "What happened? What happened?"

"I don't know. I think my water broke," April said as she sat on the toilet.

The water was gone now, and no thanks to gravity, our little girl was like a bowling ball wedged between April's hips.

The next contraction came, and April didn't know what to do with herself because of the pain. She thrashed around, screaming and puffing air, looking for some way to twist her body to lessen the pain. I felt like I was locked in a room with a wild animal. April was unpredictable and unwilling to listen to me. She was relying on instinct now to guide her, and her body was doing the work. Between contractions, she sat concentrating, her eyes fixed on the floor, her mind behind armor, protecting itself. She was a tank, and I had no way of getting inside.

Watching a person in labor feels like watching someone drown. It's that horrifying. I knew I had to leave April in order to help her or we would never get to the hospital, but I couldn't

imagine leaving her there by herself, as desperate as she was to hold my hand. I also knew I needed to think straight for both of us, but my mind was like traffic noise. I couldn't distinguish one thought from another.

After the next contraction passed, I sprinted across the apartment to our bedroom only to discover that I couldn't find my list and the stopwatch was broken, which shouldn't have mattered, actually, because on any other day I would have remembered that if your wife's water breaks, you go to the hospital immediately. You forget about the stopwatch because the baby is coming.

At least Damián and Encarna were on their way. I had called them when April's water broke and told them April was in labor. I said they didn't have to come yet, but to be ready. When I called them back because April's contractions were on top of each other and I wasn't sure what we were going to do if we had to wait for them, Damián said they were only five minutes away. They had hopped in their car the first time I called.

Somehow Damián and Encarna knew more than we did. Maybe it was because they were parents and grandparents, and they had seen this all before. Maybe it was the way close friends know you're in love before you do.

Whatever it was, Damián and Encarna knew something else we didn't—April was much closer to giving birth than we realized—because when April and I finally found ourselves alone in our quiet hospital room, thankful for some peace and quiet, Encarna charged in and demanded to know where the nurses were and why we weren't doing anything about their absence.

Encarna dragged me to the nurses station to show me what it looks like when a person takes control of her own situation. She took one of the nurses by the wrist, led her down the hall, and pointed into our room.

Encarna and I stood by as the nurse put on her rubber glove

and checked how far April was dilated, then calmly walked over to the intercom, pushed the button, and with her back to us, whispered, “We need a doctor immediately. She’s a 10.”

39 WEEKS, 6 DAYS, 8:27 PM

Delivery Room

The elevator doors opened, and a nurse rolled April into the hallway on a hospital bed. Another nurse pulled me aside, and I watched April disappear through the double doors at the far end of the hallway before I was pushed into an empty room, handed some scrubs, and left alone.

I put on the scrubs, and while I sat waiting for someone to come and tell me what to do next, it dawned on me that the baby could be born while I was waiting in this room. Everyone else had a role to play in order for the baby to be born, including the guy who had rolled April down to the delivery room on a hospital bed. I was the only one who was literally just sitting around waiting for the baby to be born.

I was optional. Having me at the birth was like deciding whether or not to put sauerkraut on your bratwurst. A bratwurst is still a bratwurst, no matter how you dress it. My role was to be a dad, but I couldn’t do that until the baby was born, and even then, I was unsure about what I was actually supposed to do.

A nurse popped her head into the room.

“Your wife needs you.”

I followed the nurse into the delivery room. I had never been in a delivery room before, and it reminded me of a laboratory, although I had never been in one of those either. It was partly everyone walking around in scrubs and lab coats with shiny instruments. It was also the attitude. Everyone was so deliberate and concentrated on what they were doing, to the point that they seemed oblivious to the woman on the table in the middle

of the room with her legs in stirrups. She was the human body, the next lab test. But to me, she was April, my wife.

“Can I push?” April asked when she spotted me at the door.

“I don’t know,” I said as I ran over to her side.

I looked for the midwife, who frowned and shook her head.

“We’ll have to wait for the doctor,” I said.

April looked away. Her chest heaved as the tears began to roll down her face and then her neck.

I leaned in and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

“You’re doing great,” I whispered in her ear.

And that’s when it clicked. The job of everyone else in the room was to make sure April delivered a healthy baby, but mine was to be April’s husband. The baby was the last step. I wouldn’t be a dad until the very end. In the meantime, I was a husband, and that was the one thing that separated me from the rest of these people.

I was the only person in the room who actually knew this woman. It mattered less what I did, and more who I was. I was the guy who seven years before had made a commitment before God to stick with April no matter what life would bring her way, even if that meant being by her side in the delivery room with nothing more profound to say than “You’re doing great.”

Watching the birth was not what I expected. I was holding April’s hand the whole time, so I saw about as much of the actual birth as April did.

Even when our little girl was finally in my arms, I was busy holding her up and trying to get April to smile while they put in her stitches.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Crull is the author of a children's book, *Clara Has a Baby Brother*, and a parenting blog, spaindad.com, which was one of Google's top-ranked "baby blogs," syndicated by a number of online dad networks and featured as a link at Glamour.com. He has been featured as a new voice in parenting in various La Leche League newsletters, *The Father Life* magazine, AttachmentParenting.com and DIYFather.com. His parenting videos have appeared on *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, Slate.com, Marca.com and have received YouTube's "Top 50 Videos of the Week" award.

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